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# Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century,

Richard Mansbach

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### IS BALANCE OF POWER RELEVANT IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL POLITICS?

Paul, E. V., James J. Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann, eds. *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004. 384pp. \$27.95

Although this book features a number of excellent essays, it is hard to understand why it was ever written. One would have profited more from rereading Ernst Haas's brilliant 1953 essay on the topic ("The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda," *World Politics* 5, no. 4 [July 1953], pp. 442–77).

In his introductory essay, E. V. Paul poses several theoretical and empirical questions about the balance of power. However, the *real* issue is whether the concept is relevant in contemporary global politics. Frankly, I did not think that anyone (except, perhaps, John Mearsheimer) seriously believed that balance of power exhibits anything much about the real world.

Happily, the contributors to this volume reach a similar conclusion. Jack Levy sets the tone with a rigorous and well reasoned historical analysis. He concludes that "the tendency to treat the theory . . . as universal is misleading," because of the limited "scope conditions" in which the theory was applied. Douglas Lemke focuses on the

utility of balance of power as defined by Mearsheimer's version of "offensive realism" and determines that the concept is so "vaguely stated" that he finds it "impossible to imagine a scenario that would be inconsistent" with it. In his imaginative effort to add an economic dimension to balance-of-power theory, Mark Brawley suggests that it "is typically too parsimonious to be of great use," and James Wirtz concludes that the theory cannot predict outcomes in the post–Cold War world. Edward Rhodes continues to flog this dead horse, concluding that "liberalism and nuclear weapons mean that states will not seek to balance power."

The regional analyses change little. Europeans, Robert Art concludes, want more influence on U.S. policy but are not doing much about it; balance-of-power theory, declares William Wohlforth, "does not apply" to Russia or its neighbors; Benjamin Miller can find "no countervailing coalition . . . against U.S. hegemony" in the Middle East; and, according to Michael Barletta and Harold Trinkunas, there is no

“evidence of balance of power behavior in Latin America in the post–Cold War period.” Get the point?

The editors try to salvage something from this muddle by some fanciful ad hoc theorizing, in particular pressing us to accept the notion of “soft balancing,” which basically translates into arguing that almost any opposition to a country’s policies or actions constitutes balancing behavior. The most vigorous effort to salvage balance-of-power theory from history’s dustbin is Christopher Layne’s unapologetic realism, which, while finding little empirical evidence for balancing, nevertheless boldly predicts that it is “a pretty safe bet” that the United States “will not be able to escape the fates of previous contenders for hegemony.” This is a bet based on faith, not fact. The other believer is Robert Ross, who contends that “balance of power politics has been especially pronounced in East Asia.” What is extraordinary about Ross’s essay is that it ignores the implications of China’s economic growth, its integration into the world economic system, and its escalating interdependence with those against whom it is presumably balancing.

Overall, this is a book of missed opportunities. Perhaps the most important is its failure to come to grips with the subjective dimension of global politics. Authors repeatedly and positively invoke Stephen Walt’s modification of balance-of-power theory with the addition of threat perception but fail to recognize its importance in directing our attention to the centrality of ideas and perceptions. There are hints, however, as when Lemke discusses the key role of the “distribution of attitudes” and Wirtz alludes to “divergence in

perception.” Only Rhodes captures the critical role played by the social construction and reconstruction of ideas in the declining relevance of balance of power. In an essay that deserves greater attention than it will receive in this volume, Rhodes succinctly captures the degree to which balance of power has been made obsolete by the disappearance of trinitarian warfare. In the end, we conclude with him that it “is simply ludicrous” to assume that “every state lives in fear of the imperial ambitions of every other state in the present age.”

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Haldi, Stacy Bergstrom. *Why Wars Widen: A Theory of Predation and Balancing*. London: Frank Cass, 2003. 198pp. \$114.95

*Why Wars Widen* is a theoretical and empirical analysis of why neutral states choose to enter an ongoing great-power war. Most international-relations scholarship neglects this question, choosing instead to explain the origins of war. Haldi, of both the Naval War College and Gettysburg College, opens her book with the observation that states entering an ongoing conflict “may have interests and policies entirely distinct from those of the initial combatants.” The book seeks to reveal these interests. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the argument that neutrals are most likely to widen great-power wars in eras of low political cost, when war is limited and less threatening to state survival. Moreover, when political cost is low, widening a war is likely to occur for predatory reasons or to acquire strategic assets that will